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The benefits of giving: learning in the fourth age and the role of volunteer learning mentors

Trish Hafford-Letchfield and Peter Lavender

Introduction

An estimated 3 million people are volunteering across England with around 1.9 million of these volunteers working directly with older people and who potentially add significant value to the value of paid professionals (Naylor et al, 2013). It is suggested that volunteers can play an important role in improving people's experience of care, in building stronger relationships between services and communities and supporting integrated care (Centre for Social Justice, 2010). They may also be of particular value to vulnerable older people with complex needs who find themselves dependent in later life. Similarly, the nature of volunteering is changing where volunteers play a vital role in the potential transformation of care services and in making innovation happen. These opportunities allow community members to act as both beneficiaries and providers of support (Naylor et al, 2013). There may however be a lack of strategic vision in particular circumstances about what volunteering can actually achieve within the realm of care for older people. The environment for volunteering is a complex and challenging one given the interacting factors which drive it and there is a need to capture the vantage points from both sides of those engaged in voluntary relationships.

This chapter draws on selective findings from an independent evaluation of Learning for the Fourth Age (L4A), a social enterprise which provides tailored learning opportunities to older people in care settings. L4A recruits, trains, places and matches volunteers ('learning mentors') with older people living in care or receiving care in their own homes. Older people and their learning mentors form partnerships which develop around a focus on learning and on areas of personal interest primarily identified by the older person. Learning mentors come from mixed background, the majority of which tend to be students in post-compulsory education, but who also include older peers from the local community and others looking to enrich their life or work experience. The evaluation reported here was centred on five key areas determined by L4A but in general terms, its main aim was to evaluate the empirical evidence on the benefits of learning in later life in care settings through the work of L4A and the contribution of its stakeholders and beneficiaries.

The full report on the findings from the evaluation has been reported elsewhere (see Hafford-Letchfield and Lavender, 2016). This chapter however draws specifically on the qualitative data generated from a sample of the L4A volunteer learning mentors (n=22) who engaged in the

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evaluation. The findings in relation to this group established that the volunteer learning mentors were a significant contributor to the impact of L4A and provided some rich insights into their experiences of volunteering which had initially been of marginal interest. We discuss these findings in the light of what they contribute to our understanding of the value of volunteers to the care and support of older people with complex needs living in care settings. We particularly discuss the value of informal learning in supporting social inclusion and enhancing participation with older people with a view to highlighting the unintended consequences of harnessing, developing and enriching reciprocity and mutual exchange between people involved in informal learning partnerships. Paulo Freire's assertion that 'solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity' as a radical posture.' (Freire, 1995:31) was clearly reflected in the depth and breadth of relationships formed through the learning interventions stimulated by the approach of L4A. Based on our own reflections, we suggest that volunteering involves a multi-level relationship which if supported, valued and based on 'dialogue' (Freire, 1970) and 'learning' provides an important mechanism for increasing older people's social participation and community engagement.

Volunteering and the motivation to work with older people

There is considerable research that examines why a sizeable section of the population engages voluntarily in activities aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of others with much of it based on theories about motivation and some of it draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 2000). According to SDT, all people have an innate need for autonomy, competence and relatedness and the satisfaction of these needs in turn affects their motivation, development and well-being. Deci and Ryan (2000) have investigated both intrinsic factors which they assert drive people to seek new challenges, knowledge and a thirst for new skills as well as the extrinsic factors, for example how interacting with our social context stimulates, hinders or blocks, this positive feature of human nature. Both of these are important to consider for older people living in institutional care settings. A vision for a culture of person-centred care involves giving attention to language, environment, positive person work and human values (Kitwood, 1997) in order to facilitate opportunities for personal growth to flourish. Older people's self-determination and autonomy in social care, is often affected by poor environments and risk adverse cultures (Francis, 2013; Hafford-Letchfield, 2013). Ryan and Deci also referred to the notion of 'competence' meaning that whilst people interact with their social environment, they will also want to feel effective and they can do this by searching for challenging activities to master. The literature on informal learning is becoming increasingly

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recognised within care where valuing experience and wisdom-based knowledge provides a basis for reflection and means of achieving quality of life as well as passing it on to others. Altruistic attitudes also comprise an important component of altruistic orientations, one that is not dependent on personal, material, or social resources that might decline in old age (Kahana and Kahana, 2003).

For those involved in volunteering, there is good evidence to suggest that this also can have a positive impact on the volunteer in terms of improved self-esteem, wellbeing and social engagement (Naylor et al, 2013). Some research has shown that benefits for older volunteers has also been beneficial in reducing depression and enhancing better cognitive functioning and general health (Withnall, 2010). Finally Kahana et al (2011) have stressed the need meaningful human connectedness even close to the end of life (Kahana et al., 2011). Less is known about the value of assisting others and whether the giving of informal support is as beneficial as receiving it. Some organisations may not necessarily recognise volunteers as part of the workforce. Managers working with or in care settings can influence the quality of what volunteers bring by creating an autonomy-stimulating volunteering climate and learning may be one of these.

Methods

Within its broader objectives to enquire into the benefits of L4A's work on the health and wellbeing of older people in care settings, the independent evaluation referred to here also sought to review how L4A's work with its learning mentors has impacted on the effectiveness of its work overall given that they are a key resource for the organisation. As the independent external evaluators, we wanted to find out what worked and under what conditions, in relation to the learning and development interventions by L4A's volunteer learning mentors.

A qualitative approach was used to inform the evaluation so that some 'depth' could be achieved from key informants. We gathered a diversity of viewpoints and in particular from the experiences of older people themselves on the meaning and value of formal/informal, structured/unstructured learning. This was in the context of their interactions with L4A as an organisation and the purpose was to try and understand any benefits from such relationships, whether intended or not. A representative group of older people were interviewed across the different aspects of L4A's provision, to gain data on how learning was specifically conceptualised, recognised and acted upon - in order to make exploratory connections between these and reported

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aspects of their wellbeing. L4A worked in a number of settings including care homes and domiciliary settings where older people were getting support.

Given that learning mentors provide the main resource for L4A's learning partnerships, 22 active learning mentors were interviewed (a mixture of face to face and telephone) based on a broad topic guide. Some learning mentors worked with more than one partnership with an older person. Interviews lasted anything between 20 and 60 minutes relative to the length and depth of experience. These were digitally recorded. Ethical approval was given by Middlesex University and informed written consent was obtained from all participants.

Analysis involved listening to the interview recordings independently and comparing notes to identify and agree emerging themes. The evaluation was formative in that we made suggestions and recommendations throughout the evaluation so as to ensure immediate benefit. Formative research is a method for generating knowledge when working with systemic change (Yin, 1984) and embeds ethical and value based approach when working with vulnerable populations (Liamputtong, 2006).

An overview of the main findings

A snapshot demonstrated that L4A was working with 11 care homes, with 36 volunteers visiting approximately 68 residents. L4A worked with approximately 150 people per week with over 50 people in domiciliary settings. Rich findings were found in relation to the benefits enjoyed by older people from being in a relationship that recognised their potential for learning and their individual interest (see Hafford-Letchfield and Lavender, in review). It was clear that 'learning' was going on, learners were making progress and discovered new skills, knowledge and confidence. Examples included: art and crafts; discussion of current affairs; the stimulation of affective learning through the process of engagement; developing reflective skills using reminiscence and storytelling. Older people articulated the impact on knowledge and skills for independence for example through building relationships with others through learning activities; digital inclusion to enhance independence such as online shopping and staying connected. Older people also commented on the value of building new relationships with people from different backgrounds to their own or representing groups that they had little previous experience of. They used these experiences to reflect on their own attitudes to later life. Being in touch with the outside community, being able to

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continue to contribute and feel productive in turn had the effect of promoting resilience where there were adverse conditions impacting on their wellbeing.

"If I get the hang of it, anyone else can then learn from me".....It's enjoyment, knowledge, I think it's more than passing the time, yes it's not just about passing the time"

(older person learning to use an i-pad).

We were able to identify intrinsic enjoyment of learning subjects as well as those feelings stimulated by opportunities for interacting with others similarly motivated (Withnall, 2000). Providing stimulation and learning was often seen as of vital importance by the older person. L4A's work is different from the normal provision of 'activities', which are often provided in groups within care settings. It is distinct from 'befriending' which can be perceived by the older person as a less equal relationship. In terms of operationalizing or recognising 'learning', this was not always a conscious process or recognised by the recipient or provider as such but the reflective approach adopted by the learning mentors had the potential to facilitate a more person centred approach and in encouraging deeper learning.

A surprising and interesting finding was that occasionally some of the residents we interviewed described themselves as too busy to fit us in because there was so much going on. This is a striking challenge to the stereotype of older people living in care (Scourfield, 2007). There were a couple of examples where older people played a more active role in challenging the system from within the 'institution' they were living in. For example, two older people imitated and led learning activities for their peers. Another example is described in the case study below:

George, aged 76 lives in Sheltered Accommodation. He had a very satisfying career in computer science and even when he retired, returned to consultancy to keep up his skills. However, after a series of blows to his health, particularly affecting his mobility, George decided to move to an environment where he had more security when he was not feeling so well. However, George has becoming very agitated and dissatisfied with his environment as he has not been able to develop sufficient depth of relationships with other tenants in the scheme. George expressed a lot of angry feelings about this and how he felt conflicted in his identity as an older people and the institutional ageism within his own setting and peer group. Being introduced to a volunteer from L4A has provided a 'lifeline' to George firstly to express and explore some of these feelings which can become internalised but secondly to find an outlet for his potential provider of training as his knowledge and

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skills have been utilised within the wider housing scheme to support other peers who wish to enhance their IT skills. George is currently considering learning Spanish. Learning another language was an opportunity he felt he missed out on in his earlier life when he was too busy working. L4A eventually found him a learning mentor able to fulfil this ambition.

The benefits of 'giving' – the experiences of learning mentors

One of the advantages of tailoring individualised learning opportunities in care settings was the flexibility of learning mentors and the unintended support they provided in 'crisis' situations. It occasionally happened that the older person was not able to engage in a planned activity because of illness or a family matter. We found that learning mentors would adjust their interventions and be flexible in their planning so as to respond to the needs of the older person. This flexibility and opportunity to share current issues was particularly valued and seen to enhance the relationship overall, something that was echoed in the interviews by learning mentors. Carr (2011) talks about features of co-production in terms of the centrality of relationship based practice, continuity and dignity in care. This was an unrecognised benefit of the partnership enjoyed by the older person where they had the opportunity to confide in someone not directly involved in their situation or care. Individuals sometimes relied on the learning mentor for informal support and advice, particularly where the learning mentor was not directly involved in any decision making process. Both the older person and learning mentor described situations where having a non-judgemental listening ear within the context of a personal relationship, brought a more person-centred perspective to their experiences of living in care. These are advantages for promoting safeguarding, advocacy, dignity and safety within care services (Scourfield, 2012). For example, learning mentors were more likely to take up a quality issue with greater tenacity than if the older person had reported it to a paid carer.

The introduction of a reflective tool to learning mentors was also one which helped to incorporate theories about informal learning and learning transfer. Learning mentors found it immensely useful to talk to L4A staff about their experiences of working with the older person and the use of critical reflection appeared to foster the conditions necessary for more transformational experiences and to maximise the potential for continuing engagement. In L4A's processes for supporting learning mentors, written reflective accounts were introduced into record keeping with exploration on how a two way reflection involving the older person could be developed. Critical educational gerontology (Glendenning, 2000) has referred to the importance of examining relations

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between knowledge, power and control where learning acts as an agent of social change. The process can be painful ;incidental, unanticipated or imposed' (Withnall, 2000:295) suggesting a form of review taking place in an unstructured or spasmodic way and leading to greater self-understanding as well as about societal issues and structures (Hafford-Letchfield, 2013).

There were challenges in measuring the impact of learning interventions and their quality. The matching of the learning mentor was crucial as being able to establish the right rapport offered a unique potential for bringing out a dormant or latent interest in the older person as well as a sense of fulfilling an ambition not yet achieved or desired. Examples included exploring Chinese history for one woman who had had relatives in Hong Kong but regretted never being able to visit. There were some tensions identified for example where the older person did not always "feel up to it" (learning) – or felt frustrated about being able to get back to an activity previously enjoyed when they became unwell. Mastering something on the other hand was associated with giving a 'boost' to physical health as well as a psychological boost. In a couple of situations, this was seen as an opportunity to optimise health. Here, health was seen as a fuel for learning and vice versa:

In summary, whilst the relationship between learning interventions and wellbeing was mostly self-reported, we were able to observe potentially low-cost, high impact interventions in care settings. The unique way in which the interventions are tailored to an individual, combined with the learning mentor relationship and subsequent support offered, all appear to contribute to what might be conceptualised as 'wellbeing'. In those we interviewed, more specific features of what was described as contributing to a sense of wellbeing involved expressions of reciprocity, particularly where the older people gave something in the exchange in their relationships with learning mentors. This came out very explicitly in the interviews with learning mentors. For example, the concept of learning mentors getting as much out of the relationship came as a quite a surprise to some of the older people interviewed. Generativity, (by which we mean reciprocity between different generations) involved in learning partnerships, was also a feature of wellbeing. Achieving generativity, often referred to in the literature on older people, is important in order to avoid stagnation where people become preoccupied with personal needs, comforts and concerns (Withnall, 2000). Both the learning mentors and the older person actively reflected on how working with someone from a different generation had been beneficial through developing improved perspectives on the other person's experience, expertise and contribution to the relationship. We noted that the concept of 'youth' was particularly emphasised by older people, as this is noticeably

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missing in their experience of living in care homes or if they are socially isolated in their own homes. Dealing with loss, an often an unacknowledged undercurrent in care settings was often acknowledged by both sides of the learning partnership. For example, learning mentors referred to the 'payback' in their motivations to work with someone where the situation connected with their own personal story. Younger learning mentors also referred to achieving feelings of empathy and personal growth, all of which contributed to their motivation and thus their own wellbeing. These are themes that need to be exploited further so as to connect with current debates about the benefits of intergenerational learning and how this in turn contributes to the wellbeing agenda – for both volunteers and older people.

Freire was clear in his vision that one of the challenges is for society to recognise the value of education going beyond the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught (1970). The interactions that we observed in the work of L4A may not have been instantly recognisable as learning but the model embraces accessibility, equality and social justice and focuses on motivation and entitlement to confront stereotypes about ageing. Optimum conditions identified which helped learning included: individual learning mentor/resident sessions; sessions with an agreed or evident purpose; co-production of activity between resident and learning mentor; coaching or skills acquisition (e.g. drawing; use of IT; discussion of a novel). Conditions which hindered learning activity included: illness of resident; lack of any follow through by staff or connection when the learning mentor is not present; lack of clear purpose or shape to the session; irregular or infrequent interventions; poor quality intervention by learning mentors.

Chapter summary

Attracting, retaining and getting the best out of volunteers will become increasingly challenging as we move towards an increasingly ageing population, and a more individualised society (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2014). Therefore, contributing to our understanding on the type of optimum climates that can result in positive outcomes such the volunteers own motivation, and placing a high value on 'giving' is of both practical importance to changing organisations and to policy makers. This small scale evaluation enabled us to make some of the links between reciprocity, mutuality, and older people's participation through the medium of informal learning. The literature on volunteering however is often confined to homogeneous areas such as befriending. .

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This evaluation has identified that paying attention to altruistic attitudes that are likely to motivate helping and volunteering. The gerontological research in social care clearly tells us that in order to combat ageism, we need to move beyond notions of dependency towards promotion of agency, autonomy, and exchange-based models of old age which include contributory orientations to late life (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010; 2013). The economic imperative also creates a challenging environment for volunteering and there has been a shift towards job-substitution which means that volunteers may have a multiplicity of reasons for getting involved. The management of volunteering and supporting infrastructure needs to be carefully resourced to achieve its full potential as well as ensuring sensitivities around the motivations and outcomes for those involved in volunteering schemes.

Volunteering can bring broader benefits to communities, including by enhancing social cohesion. Attitudinal expressions of compassion and good will toward others can also serve as expressions of generativity that promote meaningfulness and wellbeing in late life. Paulo Freire stated that “those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow for ambivalent behaviour... Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.”

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